

DOWN MEMORY LANE

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I hope not too many of you will take umbrage if I start out with a word of advice: Don't -- repeat don't -- make a suggestion at a committee meeting if you expect it to be adopted.

Because if you do, and it is, you're it. You've just got to pretend you're absolutely delighted to carry out your own splendid suggestion.

The news media lately have been running tables of 50 year cost and price comparisons because -- in case you've forgotten it -- 1933 was the year the Depression really started to hurt, and almost nobody seemed by then to be immune from its effects. And the political and economic parallels appear obvious, what with today's recession, which may, we hope, be leaving us. So the suggestion was this:

What was it like to have been a teen-ager in 1933?

First, we weren't called teen-agers, and I'm quite sure the term didn't come into general use until after World War II. We were either boys or girls, or young men or women, or high school students -- depending on the context.

Those of us, still in our teens, who chose to go to college the next fall, were thrilled to be addressed as Mr. and Miss. There was no Mizz yet, -- not even in south Minneapolis. Those of us who were lucky enough to find work that summer and fall were treated as adults.

Perhaps that was because our behavior was adult, and that was fitting.

The teen-age market idea, however, did come out of the thirties. You remember the popular comic strip, "Harold Teen," later made into a movie? Well, Harold hung out at a soda-fountain kind of place called The Sugar Bowl. Was there some kind of cultural connection, in real life, between Harold's fictional hangout and that popular 3.2 beer joint for South Siders, mostly from West and Central, called The Candy Bar? I don't know, but when I was 18 I certainly sampled the Candy Bar's products and played the video games of that day, the pinball machines. I ate no candy..that is, not there.

But I'm ahead of myself by a year or two. Back to our 1932-33 school year. I'm not sure our behavior was affected much by the Depression -- or our dress, for that matter. But because of the worsening economy, neither January nor the June class was expected to wear caps and gowns at commencement. We didn't want to have classmates who didn't have the money to rent caps and gowns feeling out of place or uncomfortable.

Maybe the economy did influence us, in that we dressed to look our conservative, neat best -- quite square by today's teen standards and certainly conventional by current, still sloppy college standards. We men wore suits, pressed suits. Ironed shirts, usually with ties, even under sweaters, but always ironed. Colored corduroy trousers, but neither we nor the girls wore jeans, which I knew then only as overall pants.

The peaked lapels on single-breasted suits the men wore then are coming back, as are our collar-clips and snub collars -- the neat look. Our pants had cuffs, but did they have zippers? Some of our uniform pants, eight years later, didn't. Once you've mastered the zipper, you can't get along without it.

The least conservative thing we did with our clothes was to cover yellow rain slickers with what today would be called graffiti -- but clean graffiti. A fairly representative sample would be that great retort of 1930's wit: "So's your old man". My memory also tells me that we were, on the whole, pretty damned polite, and we expressed and exhibited respect, even if we didn't feel it, to and for our elders.

In those days it wasn't proper to refer to girls or women as broads, our speech, at its raciest, was tame. I knew and used the term 'jock', but I wouldn't say it before Dad or Mother. It took several years of service in the military for us to contribute to the trend that coarsened the speech of America. Have any of you walked by the lockers in high school halls lately?

Moreover, we Boy Scouts and Hi-Y guys and other late adolescents tipped our hats and opened doors and gave up seats and picked up dropped books and parcels. We had stopped throwing ice balls at girls when we left Bryant, Jefferson and Wendell Phillips. We weren't namby-pamby, though. We were raucous and often vulgar at athletic events. Let me repeat that hallowed chant against West High:

"Green and White, Green and White,
All (bleep) and no fight!"

We weren't one hundred per cent pure by any means.

What I'd like to know now is, to return to dress, how did you young adult women manage to look so good to us boys? You always were well turned-out. You wore twin sweater sets, and varieties of colored and designed collars and cuffs on knit and wool dresses, and lots and lots of bows. Your dresses went to mid-calf, the better for us young male adults to appreciate well-molded calves and well-turned ankles.

So how did we -- all of us -- afford to dress as well as we did? Well, you could buy a Stetson in 1933 for five bucks, not that I wore one; and a pretty fair, serviceable suit for fifteen bucks. Women's clothes were proportionately as cheap, and there was much sewing done at home.

Let's look at some basic economics: If Dad was a doctor, chances are he didn't make more than \$4,000 a year; the average for physicians was less than \$3,500. Lawyers made about \$4,200 and engineers a little less than \$2,500, on the average. Construction workers could come close to \$1,000 a year but farm hands made about \$200, including room and board.

College teachers averaged a little more than three grand, and elementary and secondary teachers, somewhat less than \$1,300. My conjecture is that our fine Central teachers did better than that if they had any tenure, for teachers' jobs in Minneapolis were reputed to be high-paying. Attempts were made to force the firing of married female teachers whose husbands were working. There was a well-seated prejudice which persists in some quarters today that women at work keep men from work.

The costs of living were low, but our standards of living were low, too. Many of our homes were still heated with coal, and some of us stoked the furnace and carried out tubs of ashes. We shoveled snow with muscle power, and lawns were mowed the same way. We all had to change storms

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and screens. We all washed and dried dishes in the sink, day after day, school or vacation, without electric dishwashers. After lighting the gas heater in the basement, we waited our turn to take a tub bath in the single bathroom serving the whole family.

Many of us lived in households headed by fathers who were lucky to be earning from \$100 to \$125 a month -- and their families were fed and housed and clothed, and they got by. Butter was 28 cents a pound, ham 31 cents, rib roast 22 cents. By the dozen, eggs were 28 cents and oranges 27 cents. Milk at the grocery was 10 cents a quart, and a few more cents brought it to the back door by horse and driver. Frankly, I don't know how the unemployed got by, but some of them lived with our families; there was no place else to go.

Another way families got by was that mothers, aunts and grandmothers put up preserves and canned several kinds of vegetables, and then you and I carried those glass jars to a dark storage-place in the basement. Maybe some of us helped with the canning in the kitchen.

I think most of us tended to have more chores, and to do them more willingly, or anyway less reluctantly, than our children or grandchildren perform the fewer, less frequently assigned chores of today. Or is this just grumpy old Grand-Dad talking?

Sometimes, one wonders today, whether we ate less well then. The variety was skimpy, but the harvest wasn't less bountiful, and kids ate less junk food, which, with the exception of penny candy -- had yet to be invented. But weren't nickel White Castle hamburgers wonderful? And Tom's sirloin burgers, fifteen cents at Thirty-first and Nicollet, were unsurpassed -- but I think that was a couple of years later, though strictly in Central territory.

Where we lived in South Minneapolis in 1933, we were closer to the land. Hopkins, a country town, wasn't yet a suburb, and you drove 'way out Excelsior Boulevard, to Hopkins and beyond, to pick up fruit and vegetables for canning, and out north to Anoka for pumpkins, squash and potatoes. We still do this, but not so much, and even though you drive farther out, the sense of excursion is gone.

The highways weren't as big, as broad or as many, but we got around. We enjoyed the finest streetcar system in the United States. You could ride from Nicollet and Lake to downtown St. Paul in less than 45 minutes; you could take a ride from Mound, on Lake Minnetonka, to Bald Eagle, beyond White Bear -- a regular expedition, and a refreshing trip in hot weather.

We craved cars -- because they enhanced our courting opportunities. But in the family, the car was Dad's, and we used it infrequently or not at all. The Cavanaugh family stricture, for example, was that I wasn't allowed to drive the Velie alone until I had achieved Eagle Scout.

Our last high school year was the year Ford brought out the V8 as a V8 alone, unmarried to the Model A body, and this brought about an acceleration of speeds that Nixon's 55-mile limit has failed to halt.

My first real date with a Central girl, in 1932, Dad drove me and my lady (for that's what she was and still is) to the affair, but we came home on one of those clean, well-ventilated streetcars, racing through the beautiful spring night. Being driven by Dad embarrassed me terribly, but then everything did those days; and I didn't learn to appreciate streetcars until they were replaced by buses.

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Those of us clever with tools were able to keep Model T's and old touring Chevies running, but most of us had to wait until after that first solid job to buy our own cars, often years after graduation. If Dads weren't so generous with cars, there were fewer cars to be generous with; but gas was cheap at 18 cents a gallon. And do you remember pooling your nickels and pennies so as to ride another 15 miles, proceeding gallon by gallon?

How many of us then had liberal access to a car? A handful. At Washburn High today, there's as much land adjacent to the building devoted to parking as there is to athletics.

You read and hear commentators remarking as to how the automobile was and is the major stimulus to the so-called sexual revolution, which I'm told is still going on. To illustrate this great revving-up of the mating, rather than the courting, instincts, someone made this sage observation:

"If Booth Tarkington -- that's the best-selling novelist of the first quarter-century, a much-lauded expert on adolescent behavior -- if Booth Tarkington were alive now, and had just finished writing his famous book, 'Seventeen', his promotion-minded publishers would insist on selling it, not as 'Seventeen', but as 'Twelve'."

That's all I'm prepared to say about sexual mores, past or present, in this presentation of reveries, with a couple of quick exceptions. One is that those of you who experienced love's transports, with or without automobile, earlier or in greater frequency than I, have not only my congratulations but my undying envy. Another is what my mother said when, in a bold moment, I asked her about her youth and whether they necked in those days. I didn't ask her about petting, about which my knowledge was minuscule. She responded forthrightly:

"No, we didn't neck", she said. "But we spooned".

Today, with the youngest of my three kids more than a decade out of high school, I still haven't figured out precisely what "making out" means.

So let's let that lie there, and press on to other changes.

In the fall of 1932, when our January Class was getting ready to leave Central as sons (and daughters) of glory, to live thenceforth in song and story, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected over Herbert Hoover by seven million votes and a tremendous landslide. The public wanted change -- and got it.

ITEM: Jack Benny's new NBC radio show was now going strong, ushering in new styles of comedic excellence that persisted into television.

ITEM: Other than the 15 million unemployed, and among many reasons for political change, was the fact that the average farmer, the guy who hired the farm worker I mentioned earlier, was earning only \$350 a year. Farmers' mobs were threatening to lynch those who would foreclose on their farms.

ITEM; In the 1932 World Series, as the January class started to wind things down, the Yankees defeated the Chicago Cubs 4 to 0, after Babe Ruth pointed his bat at the flag pole and hit the next pitch over the Wrigley Field fence.

ITEM: The best seller that fall was "One Hundred Million Guinea Pigs", starting a trend toward science - and consumer-oriented nonfiction books that still sell very well today. And science fiction was hot stuff, too. Buck Rogers in the Twenty-fifth Century, a comic strip, became a CBS radio drama.

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It now seems incredible that Campbell's had just introduced its tomato juice, Fritos its corn chips and Skippy its peanut butter -- and the stage for these dramatic happenings were a few self-service stores later to be known as supermarkets.

ITEM: On January 30, Hitler began his 12 years as dictator of the German Reich that was to have lasted a thousand years; on March 4, FDR began 12 years as president of this country. Little could we have known or suspected then, what these two events would lead to -- that a most terrible war was to follow on several continents and in the oceans, putting uniforms on many of us and involving all of us in many ways.

ITEM: In February, our president-elect was almost assassinated by a bullet that killed Mayor Cermak of Chicago.

And here's a BIG ITEM: Congress voted to repeal the 18th Amendment and bring liquor back. AND after the bank holiday that followed FDR's inauguration, 3.2 beer and wine were legalized as a prelude to state ratification of repeal. The public was thirsty, as well as hungry, for change.

No doubt about it, bringing back booze altered social habits in many Central High households. I remember no liquor in ours until repeal, and then only its moderate use until a couple of years before World War II, when it seemed to have become more or less a social necessity. In spite of my youthful appearance, I was able to buy 3.2 beer over the bar almost at once, without showing identification, the driver's registration card, that showed I'd reach Booth Tarkington's 17 after graduation. But I don't remember being foolish or brave enough to get intoxicated until after high school. My recollection, somewhat hazy, is that drunkenness was a no-no. Kids were thrown out of the stamped-wrist or braceleted dances at the Curtis if they staggered or fought or were otherwise obnoxious.

At dances, including Sunlites in the gym, in the fall of 1932, here are some of the more popular numbers:

* Say It Isn't So

* How Deep Is The Ocean

* I Don't Stand the Ghost of a Chance With You

* It Don't Mean a Thing

--If It Ain't Got That Swing

I can hear parts of those melodies in my mind, but don't ask me to sing them for you. I'll refuse.

One of the great female privileges is that you were permitted to dance with each other, and that's the way you learned. We guys were more awkward, generally, and if we didn't have older sisters or younger aunts, we had to come out cold -- or rather, blushing and red hot -- onto the varnished maple floor. We owe you kind women of the sore toes and bumped-into posteriors, much gratitude for pretending to follow our irregular rhythms. Bless you.

ITEM: I don't remember what we were reading then, but the biggest literary news came from Boston's U. S. District Court, which ruled that "Ulysses", James Joyce's novel of Dublin, was a work of literary art and not sheer obscenity, and could now legally enter the United States book market -- a milestone. A new magazine, Esquire, was publishing full-color, full-page sexy cartoons for the first time, and bringing nationwide fame to a great young writer, Ernest Hemingway, whose style inspired hundreds of student imitators, some of them perhaps on Central's Quest.

ITEM: A couple of the best best-sellers were:

"Lost Horizons" by James Hilton from which FDR made Shangri-La a household word, and "The Forty Days of Musa Dagh" by Franz Werfel--a harrowing story about Turkish persecution of Armenians, ironically presaging the fatal oppression of Jews by Hitler. A current, somewhat tasteless, joke was that librarians were being asked for "Forty Ways to Amuse a Dog".

ITEM: Among the Broadway hits were Ah, Wilderness by Eugene O'Neill, Tobacco Road by Erskine Caldwell, whose language was juicier than ours, and the medical melodrama, Men in White, which today, I suppose, would have to be called Persons in Green.

RADIO ITEM: At our house, absolutely everything had to stop for "Amos and Andy" and "Myrt and Marge" -- especially when a certain ancient aunt visited us; it seemed she stayed forever. More interesting fare in 1933 were, possibly, Ma Perkins, Helen Trent, or for guys and gals younger than we, Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy, who pushed the Minneapolis product, Wheaties, onto the breakfast tables of America.

It was a great, great film year, too:

The Private Life of Henry VIII, as memorable a role for Charles Laughton as Captain Bligh.

Dinner at Eight, with John Barrymore and the original sexpot, Jean Harlow.

Berkely Square, with Leslie Howard.

The Invisible Man, with Claude Rains.

SEX ITEM: And here it comes, boys, the first nudie picture any of us ever saw -- Ecstasy, with an actress then known as Hedy Kiesler. When, in 1934, I saw the visible Hedy Lamarr, I thought she was much more interesting to watch than the invisible Claude Rains.

It was a big year, too, for musicals. While we at Central produced The Mikado, Hollywood brought out 42nd Street, with Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell, followed by Flying Down to Rio, with Ginger and Fred.

Our own Harriet Lake (was she Central '29?) now known as Anne Sothorn, was appearing in Let's Fall in Love, whose theme song is still sung, deservedly.

ITEM: But what was the biggest movie hit of our last Central year? It was a little short subject which promoted Walt Disney's growing reputation as nothing had previously: The Three Little Pigs, singing "Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?" -- a tune that lifted the spirits of a depressed America.

And who was the big musical comedy star on Broadway? Why, Bob Hope in Roberta, of course.

And now I'll let you vote for the favorite popular song of 1933. You be your own applause meter -- just applaud after the pause. They're in no particular order.

- * Basin Street Blues
- * Only a Paper Moon
- * Lazy Bones
- * Stormy Weather
- * Dolores
- * In a Shanty in Old Shanty Town
- * Minnie the Moocher
- * The Old Spinning Wheel
- * I Like Mountain Music, probably the nation's first hill-billy hit, which now would be called a country-western

Where, you ask, is Smoke Gets in Your Eyes. As I understand it, it's a much earlier song, by several years, copyrighted and introduced earlier, that didn't rise up until 1933 or '34. But the big, big favorite was "Stormy Weather".

I suppose I'd be remiss if I didn't allude to the formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC, which planted two billion trees and kept thousands of men fed and clothed, healthy and reasonably happy, until they got jobs or joined the armed services.

The year we graduated was when FDR's young brain trust started to try an alphabet of things to shore up the economy, not all of which worked.

Meanwhile, at Central, things were happening then that today have become nuggets of nostalgia. Several Centralites have passed along to me some anecdotes, and here's the first one:

There were three pheasant hunters, the fall of 1932, who made a compact to the effect that the first of them to drop his Central girl friend had to buy dinners for the other two. The three girlfriend-boyfriend combinations have all survived, and nobody, more than 50 years later, has had to pay off!

It's occurred to one of our classmates, that if The House, an off-limits joint kitty-corner from school on 35th Street, could offer such delicious macaroni and cheese servings for only 5 cents, why did anyone ever bother with the school cafeteria? My answer is that forbidden fruit, even if only macaroni and cheese, tastes always sweeter to the teen-ager. Besides, you could smoke there. You could also smoke inside, unobserved by the administration, on the northwest corner of 34th and Fourth. Some wicked people I knew gulped down aspirin and Coca-Cola and inhaled cigarette smoke there, just for kicks, but what they were most hankering for was delicious, maybe malicious gossip.

One such tantalizing tale out of school from 34th and Fourth was that an acquaintance of mine was the ring-leader of a plot that implanted another acquaintance behind a screen, there to spy on the class play tryouts. It was utterly untrue because the guy did it on his own, utterly. But someone overheard guy No. 1 telling about the collapse of the screen, passed the story on to the play advisor, who had him hauled before Anna Belle Thomas for a grilling. Very embarrassing. But most embarrassing of all was that his mother, personally, was called in to hear the charges. He told me later that he was so mad he wished he had been guilty. But it was funny -- this guy No. 2 snorting and chortling, purple-faced, as the screen fell down, during the solemn tryouts for Smilin' Through.

Another classmate recalls that Charlie, the old chef at 34th and Fourth, was a dead ringer for Andy Clyde, the Mack Sennett comedian, he of the mustache and glasses. Charlie let our fellow eat in the kitchen, and he ran up such a big tab winter and spring of two-bit lunches that Mary Hassett, the proprietor, had him pay it off, \$2.00 a week, all summer long after graduation -- after he'd found a job, of course.

Another classmate, today as then a lady of dignity and grace, tells of having to sit next to a trouble-maker, albeit a handsome and clever one, because Mr. Mischief had been moved up front, next to our lady, so that the teacher could keep an eye on him. After two weeks, the experiment was dropped and the guy returned to the rear. Our lady of dignity had enjoyed herself too much. "I might have known" said the teacher "when you put a bad tomato next to a good one, the result is two bad tomatoes". (In those days, I thought only girls were called tomatoes.)

Do you remember the designation of the elite? The front-hall gang? Will any surviving members of the front-hall gang stand up and be counted? (If any of them do) Ah, at last we recognize you for what you were - and are.

One under-thirty-five English teacher engaged her students in reciting errors in the press. One kid picked a Washington headline which went:

HOOVER EATS TURKEY,
LAYS CORNERSTONE

Scarlet with anger as the kids laughed, she ordered the reciter to stay after class and then told him she was going to put him on report for dirty language. Years later, he decided she must have been an avid Republican.

Now, let's fess up: An honest show of hands from those of you who joined William Hawker, the historian and track advisor, back of the northwest corner of the building, for a smoke or two, between periods.

Can you imagine a heavy cigarette smoker today as a coach inspiring running stars? But the late Bill Hawker was a good teacher, a good coach and a good friend of youth.

And here's a pat on the back for all of us: The 1933 class was the one that paid off the final debt on our athletic field, with its red-brick corners; and we wonder now what will happen to it.

For good reason, I've avoided names, for the most part. With such a large student population, served by a sizeable faculty of 85, it's impossible to name and characterize individual persons without offending someone, either by commission or omission. I am certain you agree with me that the teachers whom you now remember the most fondly are not necessarily the ones you liked best when you were a student. It took the perspective of many years for me to realize how good most of our Central teachers really were - that the best ones were the tough ones who made me study, made me think and thus made me learn.

Central High was to me a place and time for learning, and cliché or not, those were the formative years. Central's effect on my life, as my instructors meant it to be, was indelible and its value incalculable. There was much pleasure -- and a generous measure of love there too.

The other day we were talking about the hard times during the 1932-33 school year and of the deepening Depression, but one pretty woman, a wise and gentle lady, said:

"But, anyway, we had fun, didn't we?"

You bet we did.

Thank you for bearing with me.

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